Libraries Meeting Community Health Needs: Trends and Issues
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Revised January 18, 2006

The initiative, *Healthy People 2010*, launched by the Department of Health and Human Services in 2000, outlines a prioritized set of health objectives representing the most critical public health issues currently facing the United States. Its two main goals are to increase quality and years of health life and to eliminate health disparities. Libraries serve an important role in the dissemination of health information and the promotion of healthy lifestyles which assists in reaching these goals. Following is a summary of the trends and issues reported in the literature in two special issues of *Library Trends* (2004 and 2005) and a supplement in the *Journal of the Medical Library Association* (2005), addressing ways in which libraries are serving or may strive to serve the health needs of the community better.

Reaching Vulnerable or At-Risk Populations

Reducing health disparities suggests that emphasis be placed on vulnerable, at-risk, or underserved populations such as the elderly (Detlefsen, 2004), African-Americans (Detlefsen, 2004), immigrants and refugees (Allen, Matthew, & Boland, 2004), Native Americans (Siegel, et al., 2005; Wood, et al., 2005), and racial and ethnic minorities (Dervin, 2005). Some important concepts for successful outreach with these populations include:
- Developing partnerships beyond traditional constituents as key to outreach success (Allen, Matthews, & Boland, 2004; Siegel, et al., 2005)
- Sharing perspectives to ensure that all perspectives are considered and respected (Siegel, et al., 2005)
- Understanding the information behavior and use of the population (Detlefsen, 2004)
- Investigating what is known about the specific population's use of the Internet (Detlefsen, 2004) and computer availability (Allen, Matthew, & Boland, 2004)
- Assessing the cultural and health issues of the population (Allen, Matthew, & Boland, 2004; Detlefsen, 2004;)
- Considering the use of information prepared for one population which may be useful for another (Detlefsen, 2004)

Community Outreach and Sustainability

A tremendous effort in reducing health disparities involves a clear consensus of the importance of librarians reaching out into the community by making health information accessible at the point of need. The process for developing community outreach projects may include:
- Identifying and defining the community, including health needs, before visiting or starting any projects (Alpi & Bibel, 2004; Dutscher & Hamasu, 2005; Press & Diggs-Hobson, 2005)

- Visiting the community in person and approaching key community leaders or organizations to develop trust and mutual understanding (Alpi & Bibel, 2004; Dutscher & Hamasu, 2005; Press & Diggs-Hobson, 2005)
- Engaging the implementers and end users of the project at the beginning stages of assessment (Ottoson & Green, 2005; Press & Diggs-Hobson, 2005)
- Locating and assisting in the development of relevant information or materials (Alpi & Bibel, 2004; Press & Diggs-Hobson, 2005)
- Pairing information outreach with other activities in which the population is already engaged, such as health fairs, conferences, community events, health agencies, educational organizations (Dutscher & Hamasu, 2005; Press & Diggs-Hobson, 2005)
- Sustaining the project by integrating health information into ongoing programs or efforts reaching the target population in the community, empowering members in the community to serve as experts, securing funding, and working with people who share a common vision and value the project (Dutscher & Hamasu, 2005).

Establishing Partnerships

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of what constitutes health, no one entity or organization can make effective change alone. Librarians, as one partner in the health arena, are encouraged to "think outside the library" (Spatz, 2005, p. 454). Successful health information programs establish partnerships with any of a wide range of interdisciplinary community partners. Partners might include area health education centers, state and local health departments, hospitals, clinics, managed care programs, local branches of national health organizations (e.g. National Cancer Society), free clinics, community health centers serving uninsured or underinsured, managed care programs, nonprofit organizations (e.g., American Heart Association), public libraries, hospital libraries, academic institutions, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs (Allen, Matthews, & Boland, 2004; Alpi & Bibel, 2004; Kenyon, 2005). The process for establishing successful partnerships may include (Spatz, 2005):
- Understanding the unique role of each agency or partner in order to better establish common ground
- Defining the scope and mission of the partnership to ensure clear understanding of mutual goals and one's relationship to others
- Establishing accountability to ensure that each partner has a stake in achieving success
- Establishing rules of conduct and communication
- Providing a form of measurement for evaluation and reflection

Evaluation of Community Outreach Programs

Evaluation is an essential component of any community outreach program. It is not only a requirement in reports to external funding providers, but is necessary for measuring the effectiveness of a program or project and lessons learned. Some considerations for evaluation include:

- Bringing all stakeholders into the discussion (Olney, 2005; Ottoson & Green, 2005)
- Conducting a needs assessment at the onset of a project (Olney, 2005)
- Monitoring changing needs during the course of the project so that the plan may be adapted as needed through site visits and interviews (Olney, 2005)
- Conducting outcomes assessment through a combination of quantitative and semi-structured qualitative assessment (Olney, 2005)
- Considering use of a participatory approach which assesses use, program, valuing, and knowledge construction (Ottoson & Green, 2005)
- Examining each step in the process to make the design and implementation of a project self –correcting (Friedman, 2005)

Health Literacy

Health literacy may be defined as the ability to obtain, read, comprehend, and use health information to make appropriate health decisions. The development of appropriate and effective health communication is an initiative recognized in *Health People 2010*. To this end, improving health communication may call for use of a variety of approaches, which may include:
- Improving the accessibility of appropriate health materials in communities (Burnham & Peterson, 2005)
- Emphasizing readability and comprehension of health communication materials (e.g., pamphlets, instruction guides, package inserts, books, Web sites) by
    - acquiring materials that are written in conversational style (active voice) (Baker & Gollop, 2004)
    - using short sentences of ten to fifteen words (Baker & Gollop, 2004)
    - translating complex medical terms (Parker & Kreps, 2005)
    - using plain language at the fifth grade level or lower to accommodate differing literacy levels (Parker & Kreps, 2005)
    - using caution with medical textbooks written for physicians or other health professions with consumer due to the high readability level and comprehension of terms (Baker & Gollop, 2005)
    - considering use of nonwritten materials (e.g., charts, diagrams, photographs , picture books, videotapes, audiotapes, multimedia presentations) with persons having limited literacy (Allen, Matthew, & Boland, 2004; Parker & Kreps, 2005)
- Showing sensitivity to language and cultural needs by
    - providing materials that are culturally relevant (Parker & Kreps, 2005)
    - translating materials into different languages (Parker & Kreps, 2005)
    - using interpreter services to provide direct translations of what is said (Allen, Matthew, & Boland, 2004)
- Adjusting oral communication of health information by
    - slowing down the rate of speech when delivering health information (Parker & Kreps, 2005)
    - using a "teach back" or "show me" approach to ensure understanding (Parker & Kreps, 2005)

- including important family members or close friends in discussions including "surrogate" readers (Parker & Kreps, 2005)

Effective Use of the Internet

With the rapid advances in technology and as computers become more affordable and accessible, use of the Web as a means to provide access to health information becomes increasingly valuable. To use the Internet effectively, consideration must be given to the design of Web sites, the development or selection of information to be posted or linked on the Web pages, and educating health information seekers in not only finding health information but being able to critically evaluate what they find for its authoritativeness, accuracy, and relevance to meeting their health need. Some considerations in use of the Web include:

- Selecting high-quality information on the Web by librarians including the criteria of quality, authority, and accuracy of information; purpose of site; maintenance; and minimal redundancy (Miller, Tyler, & Backus, 2004) and validity; accessibility, presentation, and design; and Web site transparency, credibility, and currency (Crespo, 2004)
- Educating the health information seeker to classifications of information providers such as health information directories and producers of databases that license the resources on the Internet (Crespo, 2004)
- Making health information seekers aware of "pseudo-health" Web sites and other quackery (Crespo, 2004)
- Creating easy to use Web sites by avoiding health care jargon, making the reading level no higher than eighth grade, creating pages that load easily, making pages accessible to both PC and Mac users, providing a glossary, creating the feeling of a "trusted, knowledgeable friend" (Detlefsen, 2004)

Marketing

With the rapid closing of hospital libraries nationwide due to reduced hospital funding, marketing is necessary to educate and increase the awareness of hospital administrators, health professionals, and the public about the value of the librarian's critical role in providing relevant health information (Weldon, 2005). Marketing plans should be developed to promote what libraries do for the community (Kouame, Harris, & Murray, 2005). Low-cost forms of marketing that may be implemented by librarians include:

- Establishing partnerships between medical libraries and public libraries which can be marketed on a health information page on the public library's Web site (Weldon, 2005)
- Writing an article for the local newspaper highlighting health information services provided by the library (Weldon, 2005)
- Writing articles for journals read by health professionals (Weldon, 2005)
- Advertising library programs and services on local access television channels (Smith, Logsden, & Clark, 2005)

- Creating "giveaways" such as pencils, bookmarks, refrigerator magnets, bandage holders, or cardboard fans to distribute to the community (Smith, Logsden, & Clark, 2005)
- Displaying exhibits within the library for the duration of a project (Smith, Logsden, & Clark, 2005)
- Using volunteers to promote library services to local media, business and religious organizations, and local schools (Alpi & Bibel, 2004)
- Displaying library brochures at human service providers such as hospitals, clinics, and day care centers (Alpi & Bibel, 2004)
- Reaching out to service organizations with bilingual staff assisting the target population or ESOL classes (Alpi & Bibel, 2004)

Summary

This document outlines some of the major trends and issues in the implementation of community outreach programs by libraries. In order to reduce health disparities, it is critical that vulnerable or at-risk populations be reached. Libraries can play a significant role in alleviating health disparities by making their expertise in health information a vital part of the community. This can be achieved by defining the population and their particular health needs and then going into the community, partnering with established organizations or groups to integrate health information where it is most useful and best received. This entails learning a lot about the community surrounding the library and becoming an integral part of it rather than waiting for customers in need to come to the library.

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